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Biog

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# JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

1871—1938

## Author of:

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man—1912. First published anonymously but republished under his name in 1927.

Fifty Years and Other Poems—1917.

Self-Determining Haiti—1920.

God's Trombones - Seven Negro Sermons in Verse—1927.

Black Manhattan—1930.

The Shining Life: An Appreciation of Julius Rosenwald—1932.

Along This Way (An Autobiography)—1933.

Negro Americans, What Now?—1934.

St. Peter Relates an Incident—1935. The following chapters in "Our Racial and National Minorities."—1937:

The American Negro.

The Negro and Racial Conflicts.

The Contribution of the Negro.

## Editor of:

The Book of American Negro Poetry—1922.

The Book of American Negro Spirituals—1925.

The Second Book of Negro Spirituals—1926.

A new revised edition of "The Book of American Negro Poetry"—1931.

## Contributed to:

The Century Magazine, Harpers, American Mercury, Crisis, Opportunity, and to the revised edition of Encyclopedia Britannica. Wrote the English version of the libretto to the grand opera, "Goyescas," produced by the Metropolitan Opera Company in 1915.

Recorded the following poems from "God's Trombones" in June, 1938, for Musicraft:

The Creation.

Go Down Death.

The Prodigal Son.

Listen, Lord—A Prayer.

# JAMES WELDON JOHNSON



## A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

### AN APPRECIATION OF JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

By Arthur D. Spingarn

### MY FRIEND: JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

By Carl Van Vechten

### THE NEGRO IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

By Sterling A. Brown



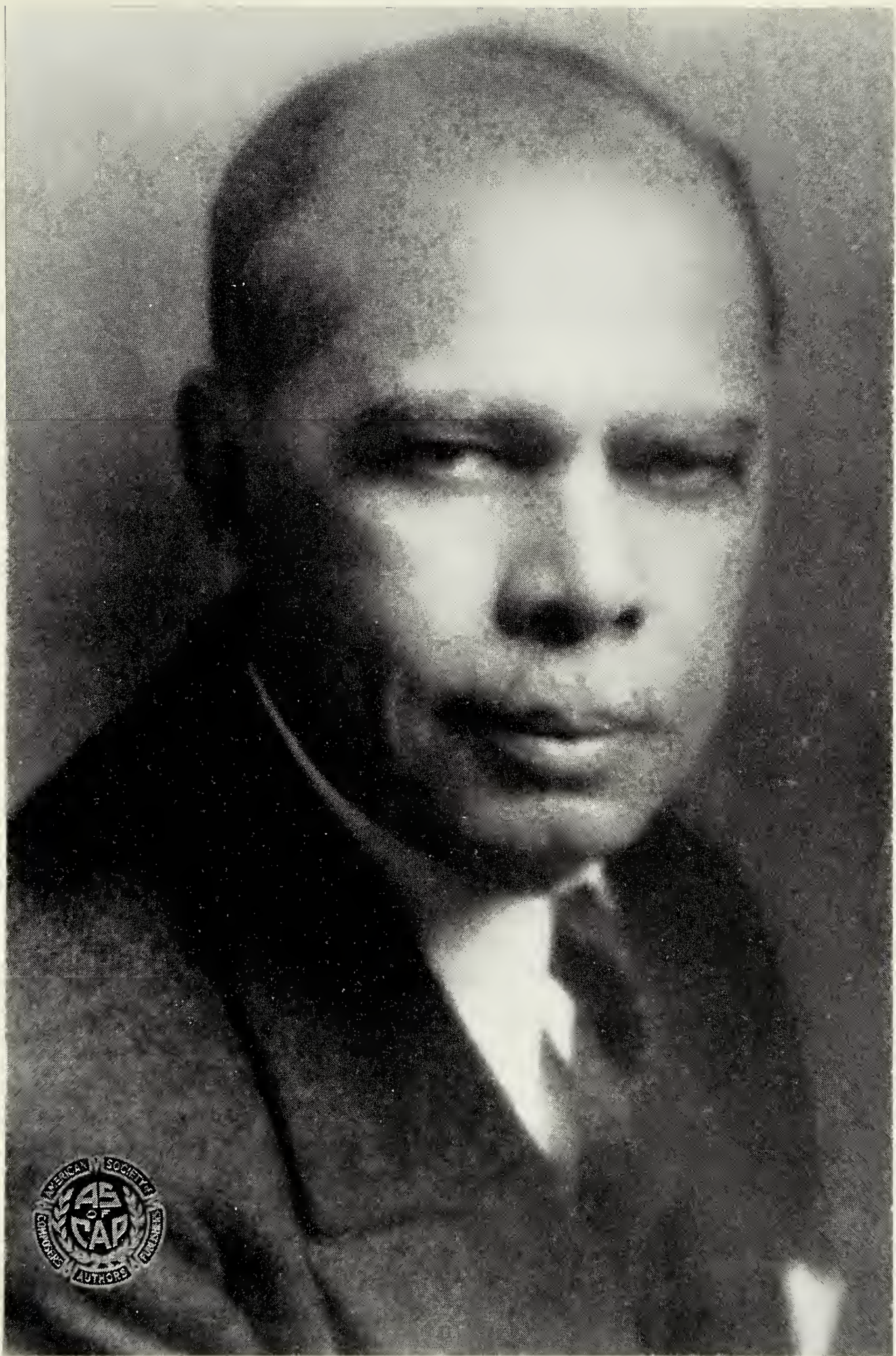
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Luanna J. Bowles, Director

The pledge to myself which I have endeavored to keep through the greater part of my life is:

I will not allow one prejudiced person or one million or one hundred million to blight my life. I will not let prejudice or any of its attendant humiliations and injustices bear me down to spiritual defeat. My inner life is mine, and I shall defend and maintain its integrity against all the powers of hell.

—James Weldon Johnson.





Copy of a photograph of James Weldon Johnson presented to Fisk University by the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers of which he was a member.







## JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

1871—Born June 17, in Jacksonville, Florida.

1887—Finished Stanton Elementary School. Entered Atlanta University as a junior in the Preparatory Department.

1888—During the summer taught school in the backwoods of Georgia.

1894—Graduated from Atlanta University in the spring. Became principal of Stanton School the following fall.

1897—Admitted to the bar, the first Negro member in Florida.

1899—He and his brother, Rosamond, spent the summer in New York City writing for the musical comedy stage.

1900—They composed the words and music of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the national anthem of the Negro, for a Lincoln's birthday program in Jacksonville.

1901—The Johnson brothers and Bob Cole began publishing lyrics for musical comedies under the name of "Cole and Johnson Brothers."

1903-1906—Studied with Brander Matthews at Columbia University.

1904—Received the degree of Master of Arts from Atlanta University.

1906—Became United States Consul to Venezuela.

1909-1912—Served as United States Consul to Nicaragua.

1910—Was married to Grace Nail of New York City, February 3.

1914—Became editor of The New York Age and for ten years published editorials through its columns under the caption, "Views and Reviews."

1916—Appointed Field Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Was awarded one of the editorial prizes offered by the Philadelphia Public Ledger in a nation-wide contest.

1917—Received the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature from Talladega College.

1920—Investigated for the N. A. A. C. P. the American misrule of the Black Republic of Haiti.

1923—Received the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature from Howard University.

1924—Was elected a member of the Trustee Board of Atlanta University.

1925—Was awarded the Spingarn Medal as "author, diplomat, and public servant."

1927—Received the Harmon Award for "God's Trombones."

1929—Attended as a member of the American delegation the third biennial conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations meeting in Kyoto, Japan.

1930—Spent the year in New York and at "Five Acres" writing under a Rosenwald Fellowship.

1931—Joined the faculty of Fisk University as Professor of the Adam K. Spence Chair of Creative Literature.

1933—Received the W. E. B. DuBois prize of \$1,000 for "Black Manhattan" as the outstanding work of non-fiction prose by a Negro writer during the period of 1930-1932.

1934—Was appointed Visiting Professor of Creative Literature at New York University from Fisk University.

1937—His volume of selected poems entitled "Saint Peter Relates an Incident" was included in the 200 books given to the White House library by the National Book Fair.

1938—Died June 26, in Wiscasset, Maine.

# JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

## A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

On that misty Sunday morning of June 26, 1938, when the life flame of James Weldon Johnson flickered a second and then suddenly and tragically was gone, we had lost one of the great and gifted men of our time. As the message flashed over the nation and throughout the world a feeling of loneliness smote the hearts of all who had shared his friendship or had caught a new appreciation of the Negro soul through "God's Trombones" or "O Black and Unknown Bards."

His life, fraught both with opportunities and racial limitations, was a moving story that touched upon and influenced the happenings of his time. In each of the many fields that caught his attention his contribution was unique, timely, outstanding. His autobiography, "Along This Way," from which the following quotations and many of the facts have been taken, reveals in superb literary style a remarkable personality, sensitized to all the great chords of life.

James Weldon Johnson was born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871, into a family that endeavored to maintain its standards of culture and intelligent living in the midst of growing racial hatred. His mother was artistically inclined and a splendid singer, with considerable talent for drawing and a bent for composing poetry.

His father, a good business man with "a high and rigid sense" of honesty, had been head waiter in the Old Stephen House in New York and later held the same post at the St. James in Jacksonville. When he reached his middle forties he joined the church and at fifty became a minister. He loved the guitar, and while his son was still too small to hold the instrument he taught him to play.

Working as an office boy with the Jacksonville "Times Union," James Weldon Johnson was fascinated with the newspaper world and resolved to run a



paper, "to edit it—to write." He had won as a prize at Stanton School a book entitled "The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass," and this Negro hero had held an important place in the boy's imagination along with Samson, David, and Robert Bruce. Now Frederick Douglass was coming to Jacksonville and James Weldon joined the large interracial audience in responding with worshipful awe to Douglass' supremely eloquent plea for freedom and equality for the Negro Americans.

At Atlanta University his prowess as a baseball pitcher, his ability to speak Spanish, and his boyhood experiences in New York City gave him prestige above most of the other students. Aside from the classroom activities, he studied the art of public speaking, continued to play his guitar, and sang bass on the college quartet.

Teaching a summer term of school out in the backwoods of Georgia brought him in close and interesting touch with the rural Negro mind. He learned their thoughts, their feelings, and their dreams, and formulated one of the basic philosophies that guided him through his years—that always one must ultimately rely on the masses if leadership would effectively realize the long, slow movement of bringing a race forward.

The principalship of Stanton School in Jacksonville was awaiting him upon graduation from college. From a grammar school he soon had made it into a high school. In addition to teaching, he read law in the office of a prominent white lawyer, and after much searching of soul on the part of the examiners was admitted to the bar, the first Negro member in Florida.

His younger brother Rosamond had just returned from studying music in Boston filled with high enthusiasm for the theatre, and together they began producing anthems and librettos to be performed by the young people of the community. A comic opera followed, and stimulated by praise of local musicians the brothers set out for New York. Introductions followed to the most important stars and producers of comic opera and musical plays.



When the fall came they went back to Jacksonville to teach, and during that year they produced "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the national anthem of the Negro, to be sung by five hundred school children at a celebration of Lincoln's birthday. With the two lines:

"Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,  
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,"

James Weldon Johnson was under the full spirit of the poem. As he paced back and forth on the front porch experiencing all the agony and ecstasy of creating, the following lines took form:

"God of our weary years  
God of our silent tears,  
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who hast by Thy might  
Led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray,  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,  
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee";

The song and the celebration were effectively presented, and the author and composer both moved on into other experiences and this one passed out of their minds. But the children who sang it first remembered it and taught it to other children.

Appreciation of it spread throughout the Negro world and it was taken up by white schools and conferences. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People adopted it as the Negro national hymn. When Dr. Johnson returned from South America he was amazed to find it holding a prominent place in American literature. Now it is sung throughout America, and people of all races are moved with humility and aspiration as they enter into the majesty of its poetical and musical quality.

The New York firm of "Cole and Johnson Brothers," composed of James Weldon and Rosamond Johnson and Bob Cole, was a partnership which lasted seven years, during which time two hundred of their songs were sung in musical

shows on Broadway or on the "road" including: "The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes," "My Castle on the Nile," "Under the Bamboo Tree," and "The Congo Love Song." Their songs became famous and were heard on city street and in country hamlet sung by Anna Held, Lillian Russell, Fay Templeton, and May Irwin. College songs came also from their pen, and arrangements of "Yale Boola," "Didn't He Ramble," and others are still sung.

As chairman of the house committee of the New York Colored Republican Club in 1904 he was introduced into the American game of politics. A campaign song by the trio brought forth a complimentary letter from Theodore Roosevelt. Because of his legal background and his awareness of the great fight that was being made to integrate the Negro more fully into a deserving place politically, the idea was proposed to him by Charles W. Anderson and Booker T. Washington to consider a foreign post as ambassador or consul. The service interested him sufficiently so that he was persuaded to represent his country and his group for nine years as United States Consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua. His work during these years was evaluated in the highest terms by Wilbur Carr of the State Department.

The desire for writing was still with him and soon "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man" was completed. Poetry then found a responsive chord and "O Black and Unknown Bards" appeared in "The Century Magazine" soon followed by his beautiful sonnet, "Mother Night."

On returning to Nicaragua after a short visit home, he took back with him his talented and beautiful young bride, Grace Nail Johnson. Together they shared the vicissitudes of the consularship in this South American country through a revolutionary period.

Eligible for a new consular post which he had considered favorably, he found himself confronted by political blocking based on race prejudice. He realized that careering in the diplomatic service was not yet a reality for anyone in America, and weighing his future he sent in his resignation.

When he was offered the position of Field Secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People with offices at 70 Fifth Avenue, New York City, it seemed to him that every bit of experience from the principalship of Stanton High School in Jacksonville to editorship on "The New York Age" had been in preparation for the gigantic task before him. Europe was in the midst of the World War. The shifting and reshifting of social patterns offered opportunity for recasting the status of the Negro in American life. What new forms would evolve depended largely on all groups working together with intelligence and understanding.

During the next fourteen years he carried on his literary achievements as he pushed the newly defined platform of the N. A. A. C. P. Although there were sixty-eight branches in the North and West, there were only three in the South where the majority of Negroes live. A whirlwind trip through the South, consulting with every editor of the leading newspapers and organizing the first extended branch system of the N. A. A. C. P., created a new awareness of the potentialities of combined strength.

Lynchings, race riots, the East St. Louis Massacre, fear and distrust of each other on the part of both races, all were part of the war and post war psychology of the country. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, guided by Dr. Johnson, organized the Negroes below the Mason and Dixon Line into the great "Empire of the South," and sent ten thousand Negroes marching silently down Fifth Avenue in protest against the ravages of race prejudice. Dr. Johnson went to Haiti to investigate the harsh conditions under the American occupation, and his report made Haiti a Harding campaign issue. The Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill was pushed through the House of Representatives after a long two-year period of educational build-up. It failed to pass the Senate but the issues at stake had been thoroughly discussed on the floors of Congress, in civic groups, and in the press, and the whole country was for the first time awakened to the necessity of wiping out this heinous practice.



In the midst of this pitched battle between justice and wrong he says of himself, "I struggled constantly not to permit that part of me which was artist to become entirely submerged." "The Book of American Negro Poetry" with a necessary historical introduction entitled 'The Creative Genius of the Negro' was published in 1922. "The Book of American Negro Spirituals" followed and of this study of the spirituals he says, "I was in touch with the deepest revelation of the Negro's soul that has yet been made, and I felt attuned to it."

He had written "The Creation" earlier and now freshly inspired by the spirituals he wrote "Go Down, Death" and the other poems in the collection he called "God's Trombones—Seven Negro Sermons in Verse."

The early twenties was the era in which Harlem became known as the home of Negro literature and art. The Johnsons went to many of the "literary" parties, and entertained in their home in Harlem; but underneath all the superficial gayety they saw also the other side of Harlem—the masses struggling for a livelihood, doubly handicapped by poverty and color, within which lay real comedy and real tragedy awaiting an interpreter.

After some weeks in Japan attending as a delegate the third biennial conference of the Institute of Pacific Relations, he settled down in New York to a year of writing made possible by a Rosenwald Fellowship. "Black Manhattan," the story of the Negro in New York since the founding of the "Harlem" of 1626, and "St. Peter Relates an Incident of the Resurrection Day" were creative products of that year. A revision of the "Book of American Negro Poetry" followed, and his own autobiography, "Along This Way," was well begun.

In 1931 he resigned as secretary of the N. A. A. C. P. to accept the newly-created Adam K. Spence Chair of Creative Literature and Writing at Fisk University. Of this new work he says:

"I feel that on this favorable ground (Fisk University) I shall be able to help effectively in developing additional racial strength and fitness and in shaping fresh forces against bigotry and racial wrong.



"If the Negro is made to fail, America fails with him. If America wishes to make democratic institutions secure, she must deal with this question right and righteously. . . . And she must bear in mind that it is a question which can be neither avoided nor postponed, it is not distant in position or time; it is immediately at hand and imminent; it must be squarely met and answered—for the Negroes directly concerned are not in far-off Africa; they are in and within our midst."

A series of chapel talks in which he interpreted to the Fisk students the broader aspects of world race situations as they exist today with suggestions as to the way out was published in 1934 under the title, "Negro Americans, What Now?"

Beginning with 1934 he spent the fall quarter of each year at New York University. Dean E. George Payne had been so impressed with Dr. Johnson's life in reading "Along This Way" that he invited him to organize a new course in the curriculum through which he could interpret the Negro contribution to American culture. He became a member of the English staff as Visiting Lecturer of Creative Literature from Fisk University.

At the time of his death he had lectured in every state in the Union, in the outstanding colleges and universities, at conferences and forums, and at civic and social clubs. He talked of Negro poets and their poetry, the artistic and spiritual contributions of the Negro in America to our common cultural store, and the Negro as a test of democracy in America. Sometimes he discussed the basic and essential qualities that constitute a truly civilized state and individual, irrespective of race.

In inviting Mrs. Johnson to participate in the establishment of an archive of Negro poetry in the Poetry Room of the Library of Congress, Joseph Auslander says, "I would consider the manuscripts of James Weldon Johnson the very foundation stone of such a collection."

To commemorate his life and work, Fisk University dedicated to him its

Tenth Annual Festival of Music and Fine Arts, held April 21-23, 1939. The three papers which follow, "An Appreciation of James Weldon Johnson" by Arthur D. Spingarn, "My Friend: James Weldon Johnson" by Carl Van Vechten, and "The Negro in American Literature" by Sterling Brown, were a part of the Sunday evening program specially planned in his honor.

The lyrics "Since You Went Away" and "The Awakening," published by the Johnson Brothers during their early period of production, were sung with feeling and artistry on that memorable evening by the famed Negro baritone, Todd Duncan.

Near the end of the program a bust of James Weldon Johnson made by Puryear Mims, of Nashville, Tennessee, was unveiled, and out of the hushed silence that followed came, clearly and beautifully, the opening words of "The Creation" from "God's Trombones" in the familiar and beloved voice of its author speaking again through a recording which he made two weeks before his death.

"And God stepped out on space,  
And he looked around and said:  
I'm lonely—  
I'll make Me a world."

Thoughts of a man of magnanimity and of creative genius. Thoughts of a man who could spend his life blood helping in the fight to free America from the fetters of racial prejudice and at the same time although living always under the shadow of that prejudice could produce poetry of such rare beauty and understanding that his name holds an enviable and deserving place among the great literary figures of America.

AN APPRECIATION OF JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

By

ARTHUR D. SPINGARN

TO FEW MEN is it given to live a fuller or more useful life. James Weldon Johnson was successively a teacher, a lawyer, a song writer, a diplomatist, an editor, a poet, an author, a public servant, a race leader, and an educator. And in each of these varied fields he performed distinguished service and in some of them he rose to unique heights. Everything that he did during his entire life was not only a personal achievement, but directly and consciously enured to the benefit of the American Negro.

Doubtless others will expatiate at length on the great services which he rendered to his race, to his country, and to letters. But it has always seemed to me that more important than anything that James Weldon Johnson did was what he was.

We were friends for over twenty years and I knew him intimately. It will always be a matter of pride and gratification to me that he saw fit to dedicate to me his noblest book, "God's Trombones." While he was Secretary of the N. A. A. C. P., hardly a day passed that I did not speak to him at least once and after he left New York, I saw him whenever he came to the City. I have seen him at work; I have seen him at play; and I say advisedly that he was one of the great Americans of his generation. I lived with him on several occasions for a week; once for nearly three weeks, and during our long friendship I must have been with him when he came in contact with thousands of people, black and white, obscure and famous. Practically every one of these was attracted to him at first sight and every one of them who came to know him better soon developed a warm affection for him. It is always difficult to analyze such things, but there was something about James Weldon Johnson that endeared him to all who knew him. On the surface he was a tall, graceful man, always immaculately attired, calm and uneffusive; the first impression on strangers was one of extraordinary urbanity and poise; in fact, it has been said that when he



first came in contact with white men of position he was at ease several minutes before they were.

He was always a gracious host and always a delightful guest; always himself in the homes of the humblest and the homes of the greatest. So when shortly after his resignation from the N. A. A. C. P. a public dinner was given to him at the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York, the list of guests and the dinner committee read like an epitome of Who's Who. It included governors, U. S. senators, representatives from the State Department, a minister of a foreign state, college presidents, Noble prize winners, Pulitzer prize winners, musicians, philosophers, scientists, educators, financial leaders, the most distinguished names in American letters, social workers, and of course, the leaders of his race, and just people.

He was born and grew up to manhood in the deep South and he knew at first hand the stupidities and cruelties of race hate; he personally experienced discrimination, segregation, and mob violence. In fact, he himself narrowly escaped being lynched in Jacksonville after the great fire.

But despite all this he was never bitter, never crushed. He faced prejudice squarely—and conquered it. To quote his words, "The pledge to myself which I have endeavored to keep throughout the greater part of my life is: I WILL NOT ALLOW ONE PREJUDICED PERSON OR ONE MILLION OR ONE HUNDRED MILLION TO BLIGHT MY LIFE. I WILL NOT LET PREJUDICE OR ANY OF ITS ATTENDANT HUMILIATIONS AND INJUSTICES BEAR ME DOWN TO SPIRITUAL DEFEAT. MY INNER LIFE IS MINE, AND I SHALL DEFEND AND MAINTAIN ITS INTEGRITY AGAINST THE POWERS OF HELL."

He was a great American gentleman, with a rich culture, great charm, unusual urbanity, a saving sense of humor, a great gift of oratory, a passion for justice, a clear brain, and a warm heart, and an extraordinary capacity for friendship. He was quiet, modest, sane, tolerant, statesmanlike, the personification

of good manners and courtesy, calmly courageous, never servile nor aggressive, and always an uncompromising champion of the rights of his people.

When he met his tragic end, a young member of his race said of him: "He climbed high and he lifted all of us with him." This might well serve as his epitaph.

MY FRIEND: JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

By

CARL VAN VECHTEN

IT HAS ALWAYS been my belief that my father was a thoroughly good man; kind, gentle, helpful, generous, tolerant of unorthodox behaviour in others, patriarchal in offering good advice, understanding in not expecting it to be followed, moderate in his way of living, and courageous in accepting the difficulties of life itself. Of all the men I have encountered since I was born, I can think of but one other, James Weldon Johnson, who could be measured by this high standard. Furthermore, I am sure, if Jim's friends and acquaintances could be brought together to vote on the truth of this blanket assertion, there would be no dissenting voice. As a matter of fact, Jim possessed at least two other desirable qualities which were lacking in my father: tact and discretion.

I am aware that it would seem almost impossible to continue, at least in any enlivening manner, an essay which begins with such a complete statement of faith, but in Jim's case such a statement is unavoidable. It just happens to be true. I fully realize that a man who was unpredictable, undependable, and inefficient, an atheistic opportunist with a hankering for liquor and a variety of odd ideas about sex, would contribute livelier material for a paper of this kind, but I have no intention of writing fiction in order to satisfy any inherent craving for gossip in my readers. What I have said of Jim is the truth, the simple truth, perhaps a little understated at that.

So warm was his humanity, so deep his knowledge of the history of mankind, and the human heart, so complete his tact, and so amazing his social skill that he was the master of any situation in which he found himself. Time and again I have observed Jim emerging from a room, which earlier had bristled with prejudice, having conquered this bad feeling by the breadth of his understanding and the charm of his personality, actually holding his opponents, no longer to be so described, in the palms of his hands. His distinction, his tact, his powers of diplomacy would have made him a peerless envoy. He would have



been, I always believed, an excellent choice for ambassador to the Court of St. James. I am convinced that only his color prevented his fellow citizens, the American people, from enjoying the honor that such a brilliant appointment would have bestowed on them. Not that he regarded his color as a disadvantage. Quite the contrary. He was very proud of his race and not at all ignorant of the fact that his standing as a Negro gave him, in many important particulars, a certain superiority over white men who were, in some respects, his equals.

It is my conviction that he would have endowed any diplomatic mission, which did not require the practice of chicanery, with an especial effulgence, that he would have emerged from any contest of international bargaining with colors flying and banners waving. He actually knew a good deal about this world and its ways and what he didn't know he seemed to comprehend instinctively. As a writer, as a lecturer, for this reason and others, he had a special niche. Since Addison no one has written a better prose style than Jim. "Along This Way" will remain a perfect pattern for future writers of autobiography for many years to come. But it was as himself he was most puissant and most useful to his race.

I do not believe any one could know him without gaining a respect, sometimes an increased respect, for the Negro. I do not believe any one could know him without himself becoming a better man. I do not believe any one truly shared his friendship without in some measure feeling a more acute responsibility to humanity in general.

If all this touches a little on the side of solemnity I think it is time to warn the reader that Jim himself was seldom solemn. Nobody ever enjoyed a better sense of humor. Nobody ever was able to laugh more freely. It was one of his more frequently expressed theories, indeed, that the Negro race would be well on its way to complete emancipation when it could laugh at derogatory epitaphs. Furthermore, Jim liked good music, good pictures, good books, and

good food. He knew how to find pleasure in their sustenance; moreover, he knew how to communicate this pleasure, through description, to others.

As I look back over our many meetings, it is perhaps the memory of the dinners we enjoyed together which seems to recapture the most characteristic and personal moments. As a host he was unrivalled and never in better form than when carving a roast at his own well-laden board while he tossed comments across his shoulder to his Venezuelan friend, Lorita, the parrot.

There wasn't a mean streak in him. He was even fair to his enemies, giving them credit for all the good qualities they possessed. Even when he disliked the man, he could see good in his poem or symphony. He could be very stern, however, and when occasion demanded, he could be strong. Once or twice I have observed him when a shadow passed over his mobile face as he realized that necessity obliged him to say something disagreeable. He passed through the ordeal, no doubt with acute personal discomfort.

But more often his disposition was sunny. Happy in his family life, for he deeply loved his wife and his brother, comfortable in his relations with the two races between which he was compelled to live, he struggled with no neuroses, betrayed no signs of irritability or impatience. The Negro probably learned to be patient in the dim reaches of Time, and while Jim had intelligently unlearned this lesson, he was skillful in concealing this impatience before observers.

Myself, I loved him warmly. My wife loved him. I don't know anybody who really knew him who didn't love him. Deep in our hearts we knew this was more than a personal affection: it was also the respect due to dignity and distinction, the appreciation won by true nobility of character. It is because he was like that that Jim can never die.

THE NEGRO IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

By

STERLING A. BROWN



I AM HAPPY to return to Fisk to share in your tenth Music Festival and in this evening's tribute to James Weldon Johnson.

I think that I may boast with justice of being a foster-son of Fisk University. Fisk was the beloved alma mater of my father and mother. A relative of mine is in the picture of the original Jubilee Singers fronting you. I was brought up hearing of Fisk and her splendid traditions. And finally, one of the happiest years of my teaching career was spent here, among some of the finest and friendliest students and colleagues whom I have ever known.

I am quite happy to be back.

I wish to speak of the Negro American in literature. I shall give a rapid survey of the Negro as character in American literature, interpreted from the outside, and shall then consider the Negro as interpreter of his own characters and experiences. In this interpretation the figure of James Weldon Johnson looms large, and I shall attempt to state—briefly because of necessity, and also because of the able evaluation already made—what I consider to be his important contribution, and the forces he propelled in our creating a literature about ourselves, by ourselves, and for—not only ourselves but for the listening world.

From the very start of our national literature the Negro has attracted the attention of white authors—some of them least equipped in temperament, attitude, and information to deal with him. Working recently on a book dealing with the Negro character I was astounded at the numerous appearances the Negro has made—at the vast number of books that have set the shelves creaking.

From Cooper and Irving, Bryant and Poe, Melville and Gilmore Simms down to recent Pulitzer Prize winners, American novelists and playwrights have attempted to pluck out the heart of his mystery. Authors as widely various as

Harriet Beecher Stowe, Du Bose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, Paul Green owe their chief fame to their portraiture of Negro characters and experiences. Infrequent is the year on Broadway that does not have one play about Negro life, almost invariably by a white author. The present season has "Mamba's Daughters," a play chiefly significant to me because of the chance it gives to Ethel Waters to reveal what a grand actress she is. It serves her, as the "Green Pastures" and "The Emperor Jones" served Richard Harrison, Charles Gilpin, and Paul Robeson. But it serves the American stage as well by bringing to its attention great acting that might have remained unknown.

But even a listing of the white authors who have made—wise or unwise, sympathetic or prejudiced, informed or stupid—use of Negro life and character would be too long, and perhaps not pertinent to our present purpose.

But what is pertinent is a review of the way that the Negro character has been treated. This is essential to the understanding of the Negro writer's task and his achievement. Every minority group seems to be faced with similar problems in creating its literature, in interpreting itself. Generally, the literature of the majority has created stereotypes of the minority in accordance with social policy. Literary men have too often have interpreted minority figures to justify exploitation and persecution.

I read a quotation:

"I swear their nature is beyond my comprehension. A strange people!—merry, 'mid their misery—laughing through their tears, like the sun shining through the rain. Yet what simple philosophers they. They tread life's path as if 'twere strewn with roses devoid of thorns, and make the most of life with natures of sunshine and song."

Most of you, I am sure, would consider this to be spoken of the American Negro and could be forgiven for doing so, as it conforms so to the preferred interpretation of his characteristics. But this passage is dealing with the Irish,

in a play written by an Englishman in one of the most tragic periods of Ireland's long history of persecution.

In Russian literature before the revolution the treatment of the Jew was substantially the same. If this literature did not instigate pogroms, it did predicate "a peculiar endowment," inferior and suitable for ghettos. It is a noteworthy fact that in America the three comic standbys for vaudeville jokes represent three of the peoples whose histories have involved so much oppression and tribulation: the Negro, the Jew, and the Irish.

The Negro in American literature has met with injustice of the same quality that he has met with in life. The first concept that gained favor was the interpretation of the Negro as a contented slave. It started a century ago with Kennedy's "Swallow Barn," and it is with us yet and will be when at long last "Gone With the Wind" comes out of Hollywood like a hurricane. The essentials of the tradition are known to you. The setting is usually the colonial manse with beautiful white pillars, a perfectly kept greensward, vast fields of cotton behind the house where cotton is always in the boll. Generally there is a river near, so the steamboat can glide around the bend, and a moon can be reflected in the beautiful water. Mockingbirds trill in the magnolias and jessamines. The people are invariably aristocratic, cavalier whites served by aristocratic blacks, the portentous butler vying in manners with the Maxwell House cavalier. In the fields the slaves work singingly. But work is seldom shown—generally the slaves are shown returning from the fields—again singingly. On the lawn, gleeful children at all hours are kicking up their heels in antebellum versions of the Charleston, the Susie-Q, or trucking.

Side by side with this Negro contented in the state most congenial to his "peculiar endowment," was the comic Negro, the minstrel type, the perpetual laughter and jokesmith. Grief could not hurt him; as the Irish were to the conquering English, he was a creature of mirth and song, and sorrows did not exist—or they rolled off him like water off a duck's back.



If the comic Negro was the corollary to the contented slave, his converse was the wretched freedman. This wretch misled either by white fanatics or his own ignorance of his best good, was invariably shown wasting away in the North, as cold in heart as in climate.

After the Civil War, the Negro changed from a docile mastiff whose every care was to guard or to entertain his master, into a mad dog. Thomas Nelson Page glorified the old Negro who knew his place, and denounced the "new issue" who did not, and who wanted schooling, property, and the franchise. Even Joel Chandler Harris, valuable as he was in recording the fast disappearing folk-tales, used Uncle Remus very often to speak propaganda to keep the Negro "in his place."

Stereotyping Negro character has its recent manifestations as well. Recently the "exotic primitive" was discovered, the Negro of whom Lindsay spoke: "Then I saw the Congo cutting through the black." The joy and abandon of cabarets, dance-halls, and rent-parties—became the haunts where Negro life in the raw—and therefore, according to the observer, life at its "most genuine"—could be observed. The new idea became: scratch a civilized Negro, and you'll find a savage.

The Negro, when called upon to interpret himself, fortunately steps out of the picture. In a talk necessarily so limited as this one, there is little time for discussion of Phillis Wheatley and George Moses Horton, for those like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Lewis and Milton Clarke, and Frances Harper who gave their best efforts to anti-slavery agitation. It is to folk-literature, the expression of the countless unnamed and unknown, that I prefer to go to find the best refutation of the alleged "contentedness" and comic irresponsibility.

First, let us look at the spirituals, so well called the "sorrow songs" of a people deeply acquainted with grief. A Northern lover of these songs wrote:

"The wild, sad strains tell of crushed hopes, keen sorrow, and a dull, daily

misery, which covered them as hopelessly as the fog from the rice swamps."

Thomas Wentworth Higginson listened to his black regiment sing about the campfires. He heard them sing:

"I lay in de grave and I stretch out my arms—  
When I lay dis body down."

"Never," he said, "since man first lived and suffered, was his infinite longing for peace uttered more plaintively than in that line."

And the young people who went out from Fisk carried the songs their parents had sung in the dark days. And the listening world could learn that these people had not been "contented with slavery," were not ludicrous, lighthearted children. Not when they sang such songs as these:

Deep river; Lord, I want to cross over into campground.  
Deep river; my home is over Jordan;

Or,

Bye and bye, bye and bye  
I'm going to lay down  
Dis heavy load.

Or,

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child;

Or that couplet of tragic intensity:

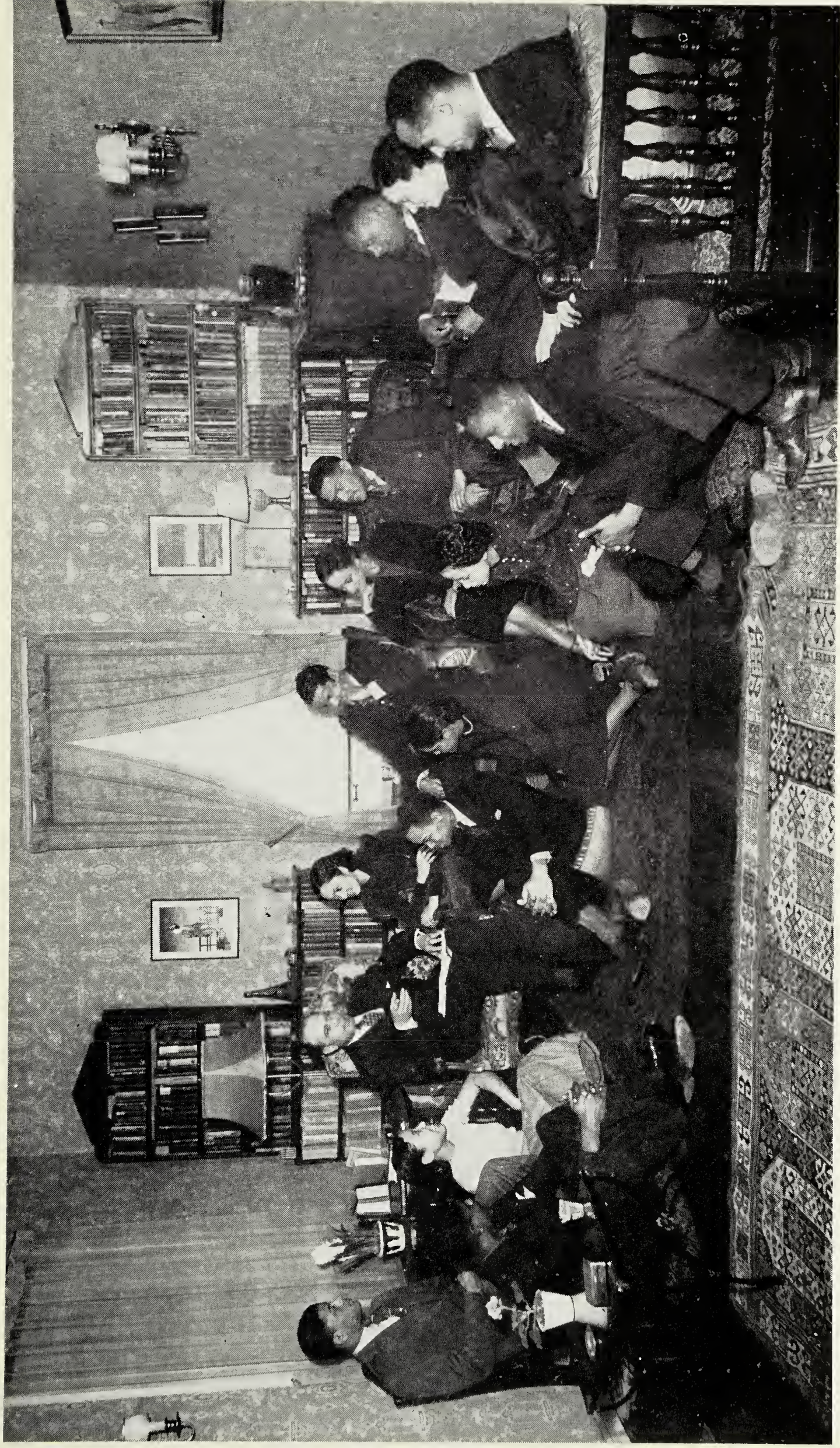
Don't know what my mother wants to stay here fuh,  
Dis ole worl' ain't been no friend to huh.

Or the clarion:

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt Land,  
Tell old Pharaoh  
To let my people go!

It goes without saying that all of the Negro's folk-songs were not religious or grief-laden. Even so, his other folk-rhymes showed a very different Negro, talking in a different way from stereotype. I am abbreviating a version of a folk-rhyme taken from your own Professor Talley's collection:





James Weldon Johnson reading "The Creation" to Mrs. Johnson and a group of students gathered in their living room on the Fisk Campus.







My ole mistis promise me  
'Fo she died she's set me free.  
She lived so long dat her haid got bal'  
An' she give out'n de notion of dyin' at all.

Ole moster lakwise promise me  
'Fo he died he'd set me free;  
But my ole moster's somehow gone,  
An' he left Uncle Sambo a-hillin' up corn.

. . .

Yes, ole moster promise me,  
But his papers didn't leave me free.  
A dose of pisen helped him along;  
May de devil preach his funeral song.

On the threshold of our times, Dunbar came along, with his heart-warming picture of the Negro folk: their spelling bees, love affairs with lil Gal, and "Oh I seen my lady home last night, jump back honey, jump back"; the sleepyhead scamp, Lias, "Bress de Lawd, don't you know de day's abroad!"; the beautiful music "when Malindy sings"; the wish: "Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass." There is little of hardship, of the tragedy known by so many Negroes in that vexatious time, but if the picture that Dunbar gives is a pleasant pastoral, we must still remember that he took up a figure who was alleged to be a clown and revealed him as a human being well worth knowing.

Probably familiar to all of you are the polished lyricism of Cullen, the wide, strong sympathies of Langston Hughes, the militant protest of Walter White, the witty social comedy of Rudolph Fisher, the brooding bitterness of McKay, the interpretative flashes, the poetic prose of Jean Toomer. With these, and their many fellows whom I am forced to leave unmentioned here, must be listed Richard Wright, the newest voice, who strikes out against injustice in the brilliantly dramatic "Uncle Tom's Children" and whose white-hot indignation is all the more powerful for the disciplined art that conveys it.

In the Negro's interpretation of himself, now growing to respectable pro-

portions in quantity and quality, James Weldon Johnson performed great services for us. When America knew of no Negro poets but Phillis Wheatley, he edited an anthology of Negro poetry with a ground-breaking essay on the Negroes' cultural contribution to American life. When the spirituals were being disdained by people more afflicted with what Johnson called "second generation respectability" then with artistic insight, James Weldon Johnson and his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, edited two books of spirituals revealing the dignity and beauty that belonged to that fine body of folk-songs. Places like Fisk, where for a long time sincere appreciation of the songs had been the rule, were not going to let these songs die, but "second-generation respectability" was in the saddle.

His own writing ranges from the Broadway successes of his early years to the moving "God's Trombones," some of which we have heard in the poet's own voice tonight, from an informal but informative history of the Negro's participation in the life of New York City, and a novel "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," to his autobiography "Along This Way." I should like to add one brief word about James Weldon Johnson as a poet. His range here was wide, and his years of production had been long. But after a busy life, he had now found something of the peace requisite for his work. In his more recent poetry—in that fine poem about Sister Caroline, who had borne the heat of the day, had labored so long down in Yamacraw—in all of "God's Trombones" where he had taken up the caricatured old preacher and revealed him as something else again—with his own dignity and power, and in the sharp, ironic protest against the ugly treatment of Negro war mothers in "St. Peter Relates an Incident of Resurrection Day," James Weldon Johnson was creating work of lasting importance to American literature. And many of us who knew him believed that there were many other fine poems to come. And then death struck suddenly.

More than an editor, more than a creator, James Weldon Johnson likewise

served as a good friend and counsellor to younger Negro writers. He never seemed too busy, never too occupied to extend the helping hand. He was generous, he was hopeful. By precept and example he taught us what Lennox Robinson urged as one of the finest influences on recent American literature:

"Young American writers learned not to be afraid of accent and dialect; learned that the materials of American writing were the sticks and stones lying outside the American door."

James Weldon Johnson helped many of us to know that the lives of our own people were worthy of artistic interpretation, that the old ways of scorn and caricature were not the only ways, that the Negro artist, interpreting his own, is of as high calling as any.

It is for such reasons that I am happy to speak in this service of tribute to him.







